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Eating My Way Abroad

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by Reuben Hall

"COOKING is the most ancient of arts, for Adam was born hungry." Ever since the Garden of Eden, they say, designing women have sought to capitalize on man's inherent interest in victuals.

I, being a man like Adam in respect to hunger and food interest, was rather skeptical and dubious as to what might befall my digestive tract during a sojourn in Europe. Would my stomach, as sensitive to shock as a seismograph, be able to withstand the onslaughts of such a varied diet

as this trip would unquestionably produce? But I, like Adam with the rueful apple, dared to venture, and unlike Adam, only happiness befell me.

My baptism to foreign diets and customs occurred during the passage to Hamburg, Germany, on a German liner. The dexterity of maritime waiters was astounding as they dashed about on swaying decks. Using a fork and spoon in one hand, after the fashion of a steam shovel, they served with an amazing precision, which at first I embarrassingly doubted. Even more intriguing than the waiters' skill were the silverware manipulations of European diners.

The knife and fork are grasped in practically the same manner as a snare drummer holds his sticks. The fork is held in the left hand, with the tines pointing down, while the knife is controlled by the right. The two implements are used together. A morsel of food is cut with the knife, and then speared with the fork. It is seemingly permissible to use the knife to drape an added tidbit over the speared particle. Also, the knife serves as an impromptu ladle to add a bit of gravy if desired.

One innovation in gastronomical experiences to a traveler from the inland was the omnipresence of the lowly herring. It had a delectable palatability, and achieved "social class" when prefixed with the mighty name, "Bismarck." Lunches and dinners in Germany and Scandinavia invariably began with a herring "hors d'oeuvres." It was served in a variety of fashions.

Herring arrived ignobly, lying flat on a plate or gracefully embracing a pickle. It was carefully rolled up and pierced by an elongated toothpick, to be eaten like a lollypop. Small strips of herring were meticulously carved into delicate scrollwork, while larger portions took on the appearance of contemporary modernistic architecture. Pickled herring, in any of its camouflages, lent a charm to the meal.

A saline appetizer spells beverage-to-follow. Unfortunately, travelers, whose desires turned to water, found themselves in the same predicament as Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner." Water, at times, seemed to be an unthought-of luxury, or just unthought-of. On one occasion, on a journey from Hamburg to Basel, Switzerland, I went nearly a night and day without either food or water.

Early in the journey I attempted to get a glass of water from the train's porter, but after a lengthy tussle of words, I found that I had to get sick to get "sweet water," as he called it.

I grimaced over some purchased mineral water, but after that I grew adamant, and sat stoically in my compartment, refusing to attempt to obtain anything as complex as food. Fortunately, I later found that food was comparatively easy to obtain. One

merely picked up a menu and pointed. When one has so very few dislikes in food, this always eventuated in rather interesting results.

The breads in all lands were interestingly palatable. In Switzerland one received huge hunks to be ravenously torn apart and eaten dry, butter being served only at breakfast. Germany and Scandinavia offered a variety of breadstuffs. The most prevalent was rye, in a multitude of shades. An almost black type, slightly bitter, was greatly relished. In Norwegian homes, there were seldom less than four or five varieties of bread on the table at the meal.

Scandinavia is the home of the "smorbrod," or what Americans term an open-faced sandwich. Restaurants had menus that at times actually were a yard long, and listed dozens of different "smorbrods." They were delicious, but sometimes I had an intense

desire to munch a "good old hamburger."

I contented myself, when browsing through Danish streets, by slipping a coin in a sidewalk food automat. I invariably received a slab of bread on which a small herring lay smirking up at me, and, of course, butterless. Butter is seldom used in Denmark. It is exported, and the cheaper margarine is utilized.

Danes delight in sweet soups. One popular soup was made from beaten egg white, sweet milk, a sprinkling of raisins, and served hot. Then there was hot chocolate soup, and fruit soups made of anything from apples to gooseberries.

The only dishes that I disliked, during a seven month visit in Europe, were two soups served in Danish cuisine. One was a sweet buttermilk soup, with raisins, and the other was called "olbrod" (alebread). This seemed to be a national dish. It was prepared by boiling beer, black bread, and a few raisins. Perhaps a pinch of salt has been forgotten in the recipes, but it wouldn't help!

Ice cream is becoming popular in Europe, but Europeans have not the American ability to prepare it. Its taste is more like a sherbet, but I was a steady customer of ice cream shops. In Oslo, Norway, I bought ice cream at an automat after the fashion of the young man in the song,

"A Million Dollar Baby." It was discouraging that that blonde ladler of frozen cream could not understand my Norwegian! A young traveler also

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has an appetite for romance—but that is another story.

I was presented with so many Utopias of culinary delight that space forbids me to present all, but one cannot visit Sweden without falling under the spell of the "smorgas" table of the Swedish restaurant. It is a table ladened with appetizers, from which one serves himself. It has a "57 variety" charm. On one I counted over 50 different dishes. After having returned for three or four helpings, it was very discouraging and disconcerting to notice a tempting dish that one had overlooked. I best remember delicious squirming eel, suspended in colorless gelatin, and enticing

shrimp, served beside luscious, billowy omelet.

I traversed only a small part of Europe, but I had a variety of epicurean experiences. I had a varied diet. It ranged from dried horse meat to caviar; delicate Franch pastry to coarse black bread. I ate blood dumplings, potato dumplings, fish dumplings, thick milk soups, cold waffle hearts, cold pancakes, hot fruit soups and jams and jellies from unknown berries.

I tasted dozens of different cheeses, and yet smack my lips over the memory of delicious goat cheese given me by a dairy maid high in the Norwegian mountains.

I ate in the home of poor peasants, and dined in luxury at sumptuous night clubs. My appetite increased in a geometric progression, to an opposite decrease in my purse.

I had tried for two years in America to gain weight, but failed. In Europe, by eating the customary four and five times a day, I gained 25 pounds with ease. All my original fears were allayed. My stomach had no wrinkles of satisfaction, only a rotund happiness. I came, tasted and conquered.